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# effective step~parenting



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# **effective step~parenting**

This pamphlet is intended to provide families with suggestions on how the adjustment in a stepfamily can be made easier.

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Most parents agree that being a parent is hard enough. Being a step-parent is even more demanding. Society has not made the task any easier, with its myth of the “wicked step-parent” to haunt you, and its forms and procedures which tend to only consider natural parents and ignore step-parents. But in spite of challenges that will test your ability to cope, there are many satisfactions that come with developing the new relationships of being a step-parent.

Most step-parents and their spouses have questions about their future lives, about the step-parent’s new role, the relationship with the absent parent. This pamphlet answers some of these questions and provides some guidelines on how the adjustments in a blended family can be made easier.

## **A Special Kind of Family**

Because it is more complex, your step-family should not try to recreate a nuclear family. You will need to deal with past histories, conflicting feelings, different lifestyles. The adjustment period in a blended family may at times discourage the step-parent, as well as the natural parent.

A strong commitment to your partner, and the gradual involvement of all family members in solving common problems, will, over time, help you create a new family that has the characteristics of all families: mutual respect, caring and acceptance.



## **The Role of the Step-Parent**

Since the step-parent is a newcomer to the blended family, his or her role has to be newly defined, as have the roles of other family members. Being a step-parent means being a friend to your step-children, but a friend with authority who also takes on parenting responsibility. Try to carve out this new role in a gradual and loving way, with tact and diplomacy.

### **Step-parents tend to assume three main roles:**

In most step-families, a step-parent is an “additional” parent. The step-parent is expected to perform many of the parenting duties, but frequently lacks the acceptance and authority allotted to a natural parent. Because the step-parent has to understand and support the children’s loyalty to the natural parent, this position is difficult.

Some step-parents are mainly “friends” to their step-children. Usually the children are older in these families, and the step-parent does not live in the same household as the children. Many of these step-parents learn to develop good relationships with the step-children and can have considerable influence on them. These step-parents, too, have to accept and respect the children’s loyalty to their natural parent.

In some blended families step-parents act like parents. The children in these families call the step-parent “Mom” or “Dad”. Such a relationship exists when

the step-parent came into the new family when the children were very young, and when the absent parent is either deceased or has no contact with the children.

All these roles are appropriate for step-parents and all of them entail challenges for a step-family. It is important that spouses, children and step-children discuss their thoughts and feelings on their new roles so that problems can be worked out as they come along.

## **Suggestions**

### **Take time for your marriage**

Step-families, like all families, are based on a good relationship between husband and wife. There will be challenges and there will be disagreements, most likely over the children. At times you will have to sacrifice time and energy, or materially, in order to provide for the children. This can lead to feelings of resentment or jealousy. You may often feel there is not enough time and privacy when children are present from the beginning of the marriage. But care should be taken by you and your partner to find time and leisure to keep your marriage alive and growing, and to resolve disagreements.

### **Have realistic expectations**

It takes time before members in a blended family feel like a new family. You may find it difficult to relate to so many new family members intimately. "There are so many people to relate to now", is a frequent comment. Life can be chaotic

in the beginning when every new member of the new family tries to belong. Patience is required and reassurance that everyone is committed to creating a good atmosphere.

### **Instant love is unrealistic**

Your step-child cannot love you instantly. Children tend to be guarded towards adults. In the same way, you do not have to love your step-child instantly. It is normal for one to have different feelings towards one's own than towards one's step-children. Your love for your step-child is different, because a close bond has not developed yet. It can develop now, slowly, with time and shared experiences. If such a bond does not develop, you may build a satisfying relationship based on trust and respect.

### **Reaching out**

Try to build a good relationship by reaching out to your step-child, rather than waiting for the child to come to you. Find an interest or hobby to share.

### **Discipline**

You may be more permissive, your partner more strict, so that you do not have a compatible philosophy of child-rearing. Although discipline is seen by many parents and step-parents as an unthankful task, it is necessary, and is nothing more than setting appropriate limits to help the child get along with other people. Discuss disciplinary actions and support each other in those taken. In the beginning of the life of the new family, it is best



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if the natural parent remains the main disciplinarian. As time goes on, the step-parent should share in parental responsibilities.

## **Respect different histories and lifestyles**

In step-families, all family members have different histories, memories and traditions. They affect everything, from who sits where at the table to how people show affection. If you join a family as a step-parent, you are the newcomer and you may have to do much of the adjusting, at least in the beginning. Also, remember that your partner and the children have had common life-experiences in which you did not take part. This may make you feel like an outsider at times, but from now on all of you will create memories that you will share in the future.

The step-children who regularly visit their absent natural parent continue to enjoy experiences of which you are not part. The other household may have different rules and routines which may be inconsistent with those of your family.

Rarely do we find two families who have the same lifestyle. This may have to be accepted, and you and your partner may have to help the children come to terms with the differences.

## **You step-children's relationship with the absent parent**

Refrain from negative remarks about this parent, no matter who it is and no matter what your feelings are. Because this absent parent is an important person for the child, support the relationship. Visits with the grand-parents should also be supported. Allow the child to share with you his or her experiences from visits with the natural family.

## **Be alert to sexual matters**

Because blood relationships between you and your step-children, or between step-siblings do not exist, sexual tension may occur. Your relationship with your partner may also be intense because it is new. It is important to understand that this heightened tension can be difficult for children to deal with, particularly older children. Try to provide as much privacy for everyone as is possible.

## **Be yourself**

Do not attempt to replace the natural parent. Avoid competing with your spouse's ex. By respecting your partner's ex-spouse and by communicating regularly with this person about the children, much of the competition can be avoided, and co-operation can develop among all the adults involved.

## **Examining finances**

Pressures about money can be greater in blended families. A natural parent can feel guilty for the financial burden on the partner by the presence of children.

Adults in these families may feel overwhelmed by the financial burden placed on them in raising a new family. Many step-families come to realize that they have to lower their standard of living, at least for a while. In order to avoid feelings of resentment and disappointment, discuss your financial situation with your partner. A realistic view and honest exchange of thoughts and facts on this subject may reduce misunderstandings.

## **Children and Step-Families**

Children of all ages will need guidance in adjusting to a step-family. For them, remarriage is almost always stressful.

Forming a new family out of two existing ones often means to the child that he will have to move to a new neighbourhood, perhaps losing contact with friends and familiar teachers. A new blended family may mean that the child has to share possessions and space with step-siblings. In some cases, the child may lose the position which she held in the former family. The oldest becomes a middle child for instance, or the youngest may resent that she is no longer the baby, creating feelings of sadness, loss and resentment.

A new step-family can also bring about loss of a particularly close parent-child relationship. This may be painful for the child until he has found a safe and secure place in the new blended family.

## Some Suggestions

From life in a first family, the child had to adjust to living with a single parent, then the new step-family requires a new adjustment. Try to exercise patience and understanding. It is an anxious time for the child. Help him express his feelings about the new family openly.

Do not over-react to a child's occasional negative remark or rejection of you. The child's ambivalence is expressed in this way. Reach out to her, try to build a good relationship, share some time with her.

Allow the natural parent and the child to engage in activities they have enjoyed together before, i.e. games, bedtime stories, sports, music. The new family does best if a balance between old loyalties and new family feeling can be reached.

Understand the child's loyalty towards the natural parent and support the relationship.

Do not expect your step-child to love you immediately. A good relationship between you, the step-parent, and the child will only grow slowly.

Refrain from criticism and go slow on setting limits until a good relationship has developed.

It is particularly difficult to establish a blended family with teenagers. A teen is formed by the first family, teenagers are

trying to find their own identity and they want some distance from restrictive family ties.

Keep an open mind and accept the teen for what he is. In spite of a teen's striving for independence, he wants to belong to the new family.

Show teenagers that they can have some influence on how good the new step-family will be. Encourage teenagers to solve problems by discussion.

Emphasize the benefits of the new family to all the children.

## **Visiting Between Two Homes**

Regular visiting requires flexibility of the adults and children involved. Children say that they find going back and forth between the two homes the most difficult part of being a step-child.

Help the child who comes to visit by introducing him/her to other children in the neighbourhood, by involving him in plans for special activities, by allowing her to bring a friend occasionally, by giving her a corner of the house or at least a drawer that is hers alone.

## **Step-Siblings**

Sibling rivalries are common in step-families and they are often drawn according to bloodlines. Competition may be high for attention from parent and step-parent. Half-siblings can represent a threat to the other children, because



they are seen as belonging to both adults. Try to avoid favouritism and deal with children fairly. When arguments between the children occur, handle them objectively. Acknowledge good behaviour and cooperation among all the children.

## **Seeking Help**

Professional counselling may help in resolving problems in your blended family. Choose a counsellor carefully, asking about credentials, training and years of practice.

Look for: Family service agencies  
Mental health centres  
Private professionals who  
work with families (i.e.  
counsellors, psychologists,  
psychiatrists.)



